

Statement of Mary Staudt
Middle School Teacher and parent of two children in Ridgefield, CT
to the Education Committee, Connecticut General Assembly
29 February 2008

Chairman Senator Gaffey, Chairman Representative Fleischmann, and Members of the Committee, I deeply appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today at this hearing on the Genocide Awareness Education bill.

I hate to admit this, but five years ago, my attitude toward the situation in Africa could best be described as social Darwinism. My callousness towards the AIDS crisis and the poverty and strife there appalls me now. When the Rwanda genocide occurred 14 years ago, I saw the stories on the front page of the New York Times, and thought it was terrible, but did nothing about it, not even write a letter.

In 2004 my school district began offering summer institutes with Facing History and Ourselves, a genocide education organization. Never in my 23 years in education have I experienced training that not only significantly improved my teaching, but affected me as a person so dramatically. I can emphatically assert that my many colleagues who were trained with me would agree.

Genocide education does not begin and end with learning about the Holocaust (although a worthy topic which I believe should be studied by all students). Rather, it began with us as thinking about what is our "Universe of Obligation": an essential question in the unit in which students explore their moral and social responsibility to injustices with which they are confronted. Teachers and students learned what is it about human nature and attitudes that allows evil to occur in our midst, and examined examples from history, including the Holocaust, the Armenian and Rwanda genocides, and the treatment of Native Americans in the 19th century, and the Civil Rights Movement. We learned as educators and brought into our classrooms from every grade from 6th through 12th the idea so eloquently stated by Edmund Burke, Edmund Burke said, "The only thing necessary for the triumph [of evil] is for good men to do nothing." I have personally witnessed how our students have learned to be upstanders, not bystanders, from the decrease to bullying in the lunchroom, to their getting involved in various human rights issues such as child labor, Darfur, and economic and environmental sustainability issues, such as Fair Trade and recycling programs. Our students and teachers are far more socially conscious than they were 5 years ago, and truly feel that they are empowered to make a difference in their word for positive change.

Please allow me to give a couple of specific examples of how genocide education has affected high school students. During a discussion about the Holocaust in US History class, students commented how awful it was, and thank God we live now. The teacher, Joanna Lewick acknowledged their feelings, and then asked them if they realized there was a genocide going on right then. She pulled up pictures and information about Darfur. Students were horrified. One student in particular was so moved, she became committed to do something. She worked with Mrs. Lewick and the social studies

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department chair to begin the first annual Darfur Benefit, a night where students raise awareness and aid to Darfur relief programs.

Another example is when we brought the students (juniors) last year to listen to two speakers in the city. They were so moved by what they learned that they formed STAND. This group organized two days for education, one in the early spring and one in the late spring. In addition to the information the school community learned about Darfur as a result of those two days, students learned the avenue of how to contact government officials (they wrote postcards imploring Pres. Bush to take action called Plan B)...they also learned how their actions could inform and unify others - to make a difference. This year, the same group was involved in learning more and educating others as well...

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. I am prepared to answer any questions.